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AUTHOR	Shepard, Blythe
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents three activities developed from research on the life-career development process of youth. The activities are designed to stimulate young people to develop new views of self within the context of their world. The possible selves mapping exercise, community life-space mapping, and photographic displays are self-assessment and exploration activities that are contextual in focus, flexible for use with a wide variety of clients and counseling situations, and practical in application. The possible selves mapping exercise can generate a number of hopes and fears for the future, develop client understanding and appreciation of personal values, and connect current activities with hopes and fears for the future. The community life-spacing map is useful in helping clients create a visual representation of the self within a community context, promote a perspective on the self, develop views of themselves, and produce a record that allows individuals to return to the map over the course of counseling. Ways of helping to create a community life-span map are included along with how to help clients make connections. These subjective approaches to career counseling emphasize meaning and meaning-making. (Contains 10 references.) (JDM)

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Creating Meaning and Making Connections: Lifeplanning Exploration Workshop

Blythe Shepard, M.A.
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

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B. SHEPARD

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Understanding oneself is the first step in life-career planning

or the process of self-development during the course of one's life. Contextual factors that contribute to one's development are often overlooked in self-assessment. Yet recent lifespan developmental models (e.g., Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg 1986) have drawn attention to the roles of familial, social, and environmental factors in fostering human development. We construct our sense of self through our perceptions and the personal meanings we give to personal, interpersonal, societal, and cultural experiences. Our self-understandings are often presented in the form of stories and metaphors.

The three activities presented in this paper were developed through my research on the life-career development process of youth. The possible selves mapping exercise, community life-space mapping, and photographic displays are self-assessment and exploration activities that are contextual in focus, flexible for use with a wide variety of clients and counselling situations, and practical in application. They foster the development of present and future narratives and encourage client responsibility through action (Amundson 1998).

These activities have been developed to:

- provide hands-on strategies that can be used with individual clients, small groups, and a wide range of clients;
- increase awareness that individuals are always located in a specific context from which they give voice to their concerns;
- recognize that storying helps young people to express their beliefs, desires, values, emotions, and experiences;
- call attention to the importance of giving young people the opportunity of telling their stories in a variety of ways;
- appreciate that visual representations of the self aid in self-reflection and make use of both visual (right brain) and verbal (left brain) processes.

Possible Selves Mapping Exercise

"Career counselling that cares for the spirit pays particular attention to tightening this integration of possible selves before translating into a viable and suitable vocational identity" (Savickas 1997, 16).

Possible selves are cognitive portrayals of hopes, fears, and expectations (Markus and Nurius 1986). Expected possible selves are the selves that one believes one can realistically

become. The hoped-for self is a self that one desires to become, but such an expectation may or may not be realistic. When hoped-for selves are viewed as reachable, specific scripts, plans, and action strategies become attached to them, and they evolve into expected selves. However, when a hoped-for self is seen as unachievable, the plans and motivational controls needed to attain it do not develop. Hoped-for possible selves might include the competent professional, the loving parent, or the famous self. The feared self is a possible self that one does not want to become, yet fears becoming. The feared self plays an important role in the self-concept by acting as a motivator so that concrete actions are taken to avoid that future possible self. Feared possible selves might include the unloved self, the depressed self, or the cancer-ridden self.

Possible selves can have a very concrete impact on how people initiate and structure their actions, both in realizing positive possible selves and in preventing the realization of negative possible selves. Since envisioning an action entails previewing a sequence of events that would likely accompany that action, the creation of elaborated possible selves achieving the sought-after goal has a direct impact on motivation. Possible selves are also vivid pictures of the self's potential to actually accomplish hoped-for selves or avoid feared ones.

The Possible Selves Mapping Exercise is an adaptation of Cross and Markus's (1991) adult measure exploring "possible selves." This exercise (Shepard and Marshall 1997), which is aimed at youth, is relevant to the field of career exploration and development where the emphasis is on generating options, becoming self-aware, and making plans to achieve goals. Previous research (Shepard and Marshall 1999) has shown that the exercise encourages adolescents to consider their futures in terms of their hopes, fears, capabilities, expectations, priorities, and action plans.

The Possible Selves Mapping Exercise can be used to:

- generate a number of hopes and fears for the future;
- develop client understanding and appreciation of personal values and how they relate to potential careers and other future roles;
- connect current activities with hopes and fears for the future;
- identify factors that affect sense of self and personal potential.

How to create a Possible Selves Map

Practitioners can prepare clients for the exercise by asking them to think about their futures and by giving them examples of possible selves. For example, "At times we think about what we hope we will be like. One way of thinking about this is to talk about possible selves—selves we hope to become. Some of these possible selves seem quite likely, for example, being an owner of a house or being a car owner. Others seem quite unlikely, but still possible, for instance being a lottery winner or a movie star. We might have pictures of ourselves in the future that we are afraid of or don't want to have realized. Some of these feared possible selves might seem quite likely, for instance being without a job or being divorced. Others seem less likely, for instance being a homeless person."

After the instroduction come the steps clients take to discover their own possible selves.

1. Supply clients with green and yellow file cards.

2. Encourage clients to list on the green cards as many hoped-for selves as come to mind. Put only one response on each card. Repeat the same procedure for feared selves, using the yellow cards.

3. Direct clients to rank hoped-for selves in order of importance and put a star on the card they feel most capable of becoming. Repeat with feared selves.

4. Consider what actions have been taken in the last year to (a) bring about important hoped-for selves and (b) prevent feared selves.

5. Display results on the Possible Selves Map (available from author).

Help to clients make connections

Once clients have competed their Possible Selves Map, practitioners can assist clients in understanding their map by asking several questions. Information gained from these questions can be recorded by the practitioner and attached to the Possible Selves Map for further reflection.

1. What did you learn about yourself from this interview?

2. Think about your most important hoped-for selves and describe the way you imagine your life would be if they were realized.

3. If you could achieve your most important hoped-for selves, what sort of individual would you be?

4. How would you describe your ability to achieve your dreams? Prevent your fears?

5. What other activities could you engage in to help bring about (or deter) your most important possible selves?

6. What resources and supports do you imagine that you might need in order to achieve (or deter) your most important possible selves?

Community life-space mapping

"The fact that individuals share so few common associations for a given word, image, or idea means that we are all magically and eerily different from each other" (Buzan 1990, 68).

Constructivists emphasize the importance of expressing one's understanding of reality in a number of ways (Peavy 1997). Life-space mapping can be used to discern how individuals make meaning of their world by promoting dialogue that can uncover personal meanings and underlying assumptions, opinions, and values rooted within the relationships of the parts of the map (Peavy). The mapping procedure includes connecting ideas and patterns systematically and using drawings, words, colours, and thickness of lines to identify meanings. In particular, the community life-space map emphasizes relational as well as cultural factors as important aspects of a client's context.

Community life-space mapping is useful in helping clients to:

- create a visual representation of the self within a community context;
- promote a perspective on the self, including supports, strengths, obstacles, needs, values, and interests;
- develop both macroscopic and microscopic views of themselves, and to consider broad trends as well as small but relevant details;
- produce a record that allows individuals to return to the map over the course of counselling to add further details and to make further connections.

How to create a community life-space map

Life-space mapping can be introduced to clients by asking them to think about themselves within their community. Clients can be encouraged to think about important settings in which they function. Examples of possible settings might include family, school, church groups, friendship groups, extended family, friends of the family, social groups, and cultural groups.

1. Provide clients with a large sheet of paper and felt pens.

2. Ask them to imagine that the piece of paper represents their community.

3. Invite clients to represent themselves with a symbol and to place themselves in that community at a place that makes sense to them.

4. Encourage clients to record on their maps important resources, role models, groups, and organizations, that are important parts of their community context. Draw a circle around each of these items.

5. Have them write words, images, and ideas that come to mind about each item on the map. Connect each new word, idea, and image with a line to the associated circled item.

6. Ask clients to connect those important aspects of their community to the symbol representing, themselves using line thickness and/or colours to indicate relative importance.

7. Direct clients to examine their map and to draw wavy lines and arrows to show connections among the words, images, and ideas.

8. Have them continue to add words, phrases, and images to the map as they reflect on their maps.

How to help clients make connections

Practitioners can help clients find meaning by encouraging them to explain what is on the map and what the parts of the map mean to them. Further associations between items on the map can be generated by the following questions:

1. What else can you tell me about your community?

2. Who has had a major influence on your life?

3. What roles have you played in these different aspects of your community?

4. Where do you get support from within this community?

5. I noticed that you described yourself in this way here. Who else would describe you in that way?

6. Take another look at your map. Can you make any further connections or see any patterns?

7. How do you see these influences unfolding in the future?

8. Continue to draw out positive images from within the community. How would you summarize your learning, thoughts, and feelings? Record this information on the map for further reflection.

Photographic displays

"Photographs are footprints of the mind, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts... They document not only where we may have been but also point the way to where we might be going, whether we know it yet or not" (Weiser 1993, 1).

Constructivists hold that there is no neutral knowledge; all perceptions are given value and context by the perceiver. People's experiences of reality actually construct its meaning for them. Therefore, the meaning of the world around us is personally, socially, and culturally constructed while we make sense of it to ourselves. In a similar way, photographic displays can be considered constructions of reality.

Symbolic representations can provide ways of voicing feelings and of accenting truths that are more felt than thought. Visual displays evoke existing schemas and narratives and can heighten clients' awareness of values, beliefs, needs, and concerns. According to Savickas (1997), young people need to develop strong stories about themselves. Career counsellors can help young people articulate current and future narratives through the creation of artistic self-representations.

Photographic displays can be used with clients to:
- elicit, challenge, and shift existing frameworks;

- promote dialogue that can uncover personal meanings;
- become more active agents in authorizing and authoring their lives;
- assist them in recognizing themes and patterns in their lives.

How to create a photographic or magazine display

Clients can be introduced to the idea of visual representations by viewing collages made from pictures taken from magazines. Photography books and art books can also act as stimuli for creating their own displays. Displays can be made of a wide variety of materials as suggested below. Practitioners can assist clients in developing a suitable topic to explore through symbols.

1. Make available a disposable or Polaroid camera, or pictures from magazines.

2. Provide a variety of materials for creating a visual display: poster board, scrapbooks, construction paper, cardboard, felts, scissors, glue sticks, etc.

3. Suggest that clients display their creations in ways that are meaningful to them: self-portraits, life reviews, collages, a day in the life, etc.

4. Create a topic with clients based on their concerns. Some possible topics are:
   - What is my biggest challenge?
   - Who am I?
   - What do I want to accomplish in my life?
   - What is important to me now and in the future?
   - What do I think my life will be like in 10 years?
   - What would be my ideal life in 10 years?

How to help clients make connections

Creating a visual display is an approach that fosters discussion. I have had clients set up their display so that both of us are facing it. In this way, our full attention is on the display itself rather than on each other. Practitioners can use the following questions to promote meaningful discussion:

- What can you tell me about your display?
- What title would you give your display?
- What would I know about you from your photo display?
- What would I not know about you from your photo display?

- What is this display saying to you?
- What have you learned from making this display? What surprised you?
- How does this display as a whole impress you?
- What themes are evident in the stories you told?
- Is there a preoccupation with one theme?
- What identity is being created?

Conclusion

"The working out of problems can occur at a semiconscious level with the creative process serving as a powerful driving force. Unharnessing creative energy usually serves as a useful resource for resolving counselling problems whether directly or indirectly" (Amundson 1998, 141).

The three self-assessment activities that have been introduced in this paper are designed to stimulate young people to develop new views of self within the context of their world. The possible-selves mapping interview, community life-space mapping, and photographic displays are subjective approaches to career counselling that emphasize meaning and meaning-making. In more practical terms, young people appear to appreciate the experiential, action-oriented, and concrete nature of the activities.

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